

Along the track

Leave No Trace

Have you ever watched those crime shows (and there are so many of them) where the detectives search for the culprit, even years and years after the crime. They access CCTV, phone and bank records, DNA, peoples' recollections, car registrations and all sorts of other things. Sometimes it looks as if we are under constant surveillance and that we leave some trace behind, wherever we go no matter how briefly that may be. These shows remind us that we don't have to die to leave a legacy. We do that every day.

One principal I worked with many years ago asked us to complete this personal reflection exercise at one staff meeting. She asked us to write down the initials of the worst teacher we ever had, then write down ten things that we felt made us make that assessment. Only ten! We completed that exercise in no time at all. Then she asked us to write down the initials of our best teacher, and you guessed it, the ten reasons why. That was harder – getting to four or five was easy enough, but ten was much more difficult. Then she asked us to look at our lists – how many of those things were we doing?

For some reason it is easier to remember the bad things that happen more than the good, the negative people we meet rather than the positive. As Shakespeare wrote in Julius Caesar, *"The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones."* A bit harsh perhaps but there's some truth in that. The principal concluded the exercise with the thought that, in order to become our best selves, we have to enable those around us to become their best selves too.

That reminded me of a sign I saw some years ago:

Leave a trail of light behind you,
Everywhere you go.
Whose darkness you'll illuminate,
You may never know.

We all make a difference, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, we leave a trail behind us. Sometimes what we say or do, how we act can bring light to another's darkness, even if we are not aware of that. But we can do the opposite too. We all have good days and bad days, some days are diamonds, some days are stone. That is part of life and so is how we deal with them.

St Paul highlighted a dilemma we have in life, our struggle. *I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.* Romans 7:19-25. Isn't that true! We try to do the right thing, but sometimes we don't, and like our forebears Adam and Eve, we give in to human frailties. We all want to be positive and encouraging, to be helpful to others but then we get side tracked, we take the easy way, we follow the crowd. At other times, we may give in to impatience, bad temper, the desire to get even or just being judgemental.

The reflection exercise about the teachers is a reminder that it is always worthwhile to give some thought, when we can, to those who have had an impact on my life. Nine times out of ten, the ordinary comes to mind, not the important or famous but the ordinary people I have met or events that have stayed in my mind and I hope in my conduct.

Hickey was an elderly neighbour who looked after us when our mother was ill and later after she died. She was just 'there' whenever we seemed to need her. Some of my teachers made their mark, so did Bill, my first parish priest who gave everything away, even taking off his shirt and shoes to give to someone who came looking for a handout, John who has been so dedicated to the cause of refugees, even at great personal cost and so the list goes on. They left a trail behind, and I am grateful for that.

It's easy to follow what's familiar, to take the easy way, to 'blend in', as it were. Being part of the crowd may offer a sort of security, but sometimes we are asked to step out of our comfort zone. Someone needs us, or asks us for help, or wants us to spend some time with them when it is not convenient. Simple things perhaps, but not to the person who needs us.

We were born to make a difference, not to be a copy of someone else's story. That takes faith, faith in ourselves and in the goodness of God who loves us and who made us this way - gifted and unique. And faith that this loving God is with us when we are asked to become our best selves, while enabling those around us to become their best selves too.

Regards

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